



30 Ian Macdonald, *Interior of Muriwai Studio* (Colin McCahon Studio series 4), late 1977
ink-jet print, 55 x 55 cm, reproduced courtesy of Ian Macdonald

5 McCahon in his studio

McCahon in *his own* studio! Well, that's not entirely so. For a good half of his working life as a painter, having access to a proper working studio was only to be dreamt about. Although he had areas within rooms, such as his bedroom or living room, that could be treated as a studio, these were usually makeshift spaces where the physical practice of painting was shared with the other functions of daily living. This was the case even with the studio he acquired as part of his lectureship at the Elam School of Fine Art. Although too small for large-scale projects, it allowed him to paint many smaller works, but it also became a convenient place for meeting visitors or for discussing matters related to his teaching – activities that often encroached on his private working space.

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McCahon had to wait until the end of 1969 for his own studio to become a reality, when he erected a modified prefabricated industrial shed, complete with a wide, double sliding door, on his wife's property at Muriwai.¹ The inside floor area was roughly 37 square metres. He had calculated the measurements to accommodate a large painting he was planning to do: a work to be shown at the Barry Lett Galleries from 2 to 15 March 1970 as *Victory over*

death: The way, the truth & life, which, before the exhibition ended, had become *Victory over Death 2*.² The main wall of the studio faced due north. Looking out from inside, one of the sliding doors opened to the right, the other could slide around the interior corner to hide part of the eastern wall. Outside the doorway McCahon built a deck from untreated timber. This functioned as an extended step to the studio and became a place for sitting in the sun during a break in his painting routine or while waiting for a section of painted canvas to dry. It was also where the McCahons entertained visitors before the house was built. But within fifteen years the untreated timber had begun to rot so anyone entering the studio had to tread carefully.

The only windows in the studio were located on either side of the northwest corner, from midway up the wall: one was a two-pane window set within the west wall, the other, a window consisting of three panes, in the north wall (illus. 30). Under the longer window, McCahon had placed a four-drawer cabinet to hold his tubes and tins of paints, brushes and a few necessary tools. On top of the cabinet was a makeshift 'palette' where he mixed his colours while painting. This corner, heated by the sun shining in through the windows, was the best place in the studio for storing his paints and much of his other painting equipment; he later added shelves around the windows to hold the larger cans of paint and varnishes. The studio also contained an old, wooden-type settee that, for a year or so towards the mid-1970s,³ doubled as a bed for when McCahon stayed overnight.

This text developed out of a short talk given on 11 October 2000 for the exhibition *Beneath the Surface: McCahon's materials and techniques* at the Auckland Art Gallery. The present text has been expanded and differs considerably from that delivered.

In 1938, McCahon made a late start to the first term of his second year at King Edward Technical College Art School, Dunedin. Earlier in the year he had toured with Fred Argyle's Variety Review Company hoping to earn some money, but this was not to be.⁴ Shortly after his return, he visited a studio above the United Friendly Society Pharmacy on the corner of Moray Place and Princes Street,⁵ rented by Anne Hamblett, Doris Lusk and Elizabeth Begg. McCahon became a frequent visitor to the studio, but seems never to have used it for doing his own painting. When another space, a photographer's studio with a generous skylight, became available in nearby Bath Street after its occupier, the artist Max Walker, left Dunedin midway through the year, Anne Hamblett, Doris Lusk, Rodney Kennedy and Colin McCahon took over the lease. Then, probably late in 1938, McCahon, with the grudging approval of his parents, decided to set up his own studio space in his bedroom at his parents' home, 24 Prestwick Street. He preferred its privacy for painting, but continued to visit the Bath Street studio to socialise.⁶

The home-studio arrangement, however, appears to have been short-lived. With the active support of his sister Beatrice and compliance of his mother, McCahon was allowed to convert another room in the house as a studio.⁷ He installed suitable furniture: a working desk or table, some form of storage for his art materials, his essential, if slowly growing, library of art books and even an artist's easel – an old, badly broken, but solidly built, easel that McCahon had requested from the art school and then, in typical bush-carpenter manner, rendered reusable. Whether the electric light – *The Lamp in my Studio*, c. 1954 (illus. 31), he painted some seven years later – was installed then or later is open to speculation.

McCahon used this studio for the rest of his time at the art school, then only intensely for short periods when seasonal work in the Nelson-Motueka

region slackened and he returned home to Dunedin during the winter seeking paid work. When the availability of farm work extended his time in the Motueka area, his use of the studio became restricted mainly to short holiday periods at home. After he married Anne Hamblett in September 1942, his studio appears to have become more a temporary storeroom for his paintings. Among the letters sent home to his parents is one from Mapua dated September 24 [1944] in which he writes: 'This is to give you some instructions about pictures for the Art Society Exhibition. A package will be posted to you with this letter, there are three pictures of mine & 1 of Anne's also 2 completed entry forms. Would you polish glass on all same & if there are any breakages see if they can be mended in time. Then take all to the Pioneer Hall on October 9th. . . . Keep all the packing at Prestwick St. please, they are of value and unsold things can be returned in same box . . .'

As a studio, however, its original purpose was not entirely abandoned: it provided a refuge for McCahon from the uneasy relationship he had with his father-in-law, Canon Hamblett, who doubted Colin's ability to sustain Anne properly as a wife.⁸ So when visiting Dunedin, McCahon often spent more time at Prestwick Street than at his in-laws' vicarage in Stafford Street. After their first child, William, was born, Anne's father was so appalled at Colin going off to stay for weeks in Wellington that he banished him from the vicarage, and McCahon spent most of his time at his parents' house. This was when *The Lamp in my Studio* was painted. But the days of the Prestwick studio were numbered. When Beatrice's husband, Noel, was released from the army, they were given two rooms in the Prestwick Street house – one of them being the studio. On 8 September 1946 McCahon wrote from his in-laws' home to his mother, who at the time was away from Prestwick Street: 'The ex studio is now very nearly finished – there is still the awful floor to be done – it looks very well indeed', and he describes the colours he had used in repainting the room.⁹



31 *The Lamp in my Studio*, c. 1954
oil on cardboard, 51.1 x 64.6 cm, private collection, Auckland,
on loan to the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki

After just over two months searching, unsuccessfully, for a suitable house in Dunedin, the McCahons returned to the Nelson area to live in Tahunanui, then just edging Nelson city. Over the next fifteen months the family occupied two houses in this area, but while paintings are cited, McCahon didn't write home about the conditions under which they were produced. The only mention is in a letter of 21 June 1947 in which he wrote that he had made for himself 'a most magnificent easel. Had an inferior model I could only sit at to paint – which was not bad in the front room I was painting in. Now the kids are in there & I have their ex and awful cold room to work in so must stand – one freezes less soon standing.'

Early in February 1948, a month or two before the lease on the Muritai Street house was due to expire, Ron O'Reilly, Hubert Witheford and his wife urged McCahon to acquire a house in Wellington. McCahon had doubts about this. In a letter to his parents, dated 5 February, he wrote, 'I don't know about Wellington as a place to live in much as I like it. The distraction of knowing too many people there might be bad for painting.'

The next few months were full of uncertainty as to where the McCahons would live. Initially Anne and the children were to stay in Christchurch with Dermot and Doris Holland (nee Lusk), but it was Colin who eventually did, with the idea that from the Hollands' place in Hewitt Street, he could scavenge for a house to rent. But the pickings were meagre. He wrote in frustration to Ron O'Reilly. 'Am full of paintings to do but no room no house, no settled feelings.'¹⁰ Through fortitude and ingenuity he coped with the limited space of his sleeping quarters. As he was to relate, *Takaka: Night and Day*, 1948 (illus. 4, p. 11), was 'painted in my bedroom-studio at the Holland's place. The *Takaka* painting was painted round a corner of the room, no one wall being itself long enough.'¹¹

Finally, towards the end of the year, a house had been found at 9 Barbour Street, Linwood, and the family settled in. Balancing the needs of four

small children against his wants as a practising artist within such a smallish house required ingenuity. This was especially so for his larger paintings. To this end McCahon made use of the settee in the L-shaped living room by placing his paintings on the top edge of the settee's backrest and leaning them against the wall. This formed a makeshift easel where he worked upon paintings such as the triptych *On Building Bridges*, 1952 (illus. 9, p. 17).¹²

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Over this Dunedin-Nelson-Christchurch period one of the significant issues for artists was acquiring affordable, quality paints. This difficulty began in the midst of the Depression and remained so over the years of the Second World War, with ramifications into the early 1950s when supply became an even greater issue than price. The shortage of quality paints, which began with the start of the war, was aggravated by the imposition of import licences on paints being allocated to the art societies. This created problems for artists who were not held in high esteem by the committee running an art society. Those like Woollaston and McCahon, whose work was far from universally acclaimed, found themselves at the tail-end of the allocation list. To counter this uncertainty, artists subsidised what they could get from the art society's preferential pooling system by producing some of their own paints.

If an artist used a reliable formula, the best materials available, and followed the instructions, the resulting oil paint should have proved dependable. But because of the lack of colour merchants selling a variety of ground colour, artists had to resort to the local hardware shop, with its limited stock of raw pigment and linseed oil. Such pigment was confined mainly to earth colours: yellow ochre, raw sienna, raw umber, but Prussian blue was sometimes available. This was a colour that could be tricky to handle: not only could it stain everything it came into contact with

– hands, clothes and washing-up basins – but as a raw low-grade pigment it often contained hard gritty nodules that had to be sifted out for the resulting oil paint to prove usable. Then one had to seek out specially prepared white beeswax (used more as a plasticiser than a stabiliser); a larger than usual spatula (preferable to the slender, tapered palette knife normally used by artists); a slab of plate glass on which to grind the pigment with the other ingredients; and squeezable tubes to contain the ground pigment. Pure tin tubes were difficult to obtain in New Zealand, so tin-coated lead tubes were used. Fortunately, as most of the hand-ground oil paints were earth pigments, this factor was less of a serious issue than it would have been for some other colours. The book most commonly used at this time for the technique of grinding one's own oil paints, and the one used by McCahon, was Hilaire Hiller's *The Painter's Pocket-book of Methods and Materials*, republished for the English market during 1934 by Faber & Faber Ltd, London.

Import licensing and the cost of imported artists' paints remained significant factors for many artists until the early 1950s.¹³ Throughout this period McCahon used oil paints and other related media in much the same way as most painters. This included the common, but dubious, habit of applying varnish over a dull area of oil paint to bring up the colour or imagery, then repainting in oils any corrections over this thin film of varnish; a practice that could compromise the painting's physical stability over time. Although much of what he produced during this early period has survived reasonably well, some procedures were less well founded (but not as badly as implied by the stories then doing the rounds). Among the least successful was his early use of a gesso ground, a mixture of an inert white pigment with an aqueous binder. Whatever method McCahon used, the gesso surface over which he painted his small work, *A Candle in a Dark Room*, 1947 (illus. 43, p. 84), has proved untrustworthy.¹⁴ As R. N. O'Reilly noted as early as 1948: 'Today I posted to Prestwick Cres [sic] the Candle in a dark

room. Another flake of gesso off it in the packing, not big, but it wants treatment.'¹⁵ Already, at this time, McCahon was becoming an experimenter and would try out a medium such as children's crayons, not normally used by artists.

What was to cause concern in later years was the poor quality of some of the supports – for example, poor quality cardboard or paper – on which McCahon produced his paintings in the desperate effort to economise. On 31 July 1945 he wrote to his parents: 'The Ruby Bay oil was buckled when it came back from Wellington & I don't think you should bother about it . . . – it is more an expert's job – and even experts have great trouble with oil on paper.'

What became the most significant factor during these early years was essentially a conceptual change, though one that indirectly nullified certain former procedures. This was McCahon's gradual shift from the direct observation of a landscape to a reliance on his memory of what the landscape had looked like. This strategic shift occurred during the first half of 1947, when his landscape drawings became less concerned with the particular appearance of a landscape, and more with how best to represent it as a landform. The result can be seen in the almost featureless simplicity of *The Green Plain*, January 1948, on the one hand, and in the undulating cosmic orderliness of *Takaka: Night and Day*, July 1948, on the other. This temporal shift, as it were, is also implied in his words relating to *The Marys at the Tomb*, 1950: 'I painted this in Christchurch but the landscape comes from Dunedin . . .'¹⁶

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Shifting to Auckland late in May 1953 McCahon encountered an environment that was decidedly different to what he was familiar with in the South Island. When he acquired his Titirangi house, in light bushland high above French Bay, the absence of a truly private studio simply perpetuated the situation he had left in Christchurch. But the house